

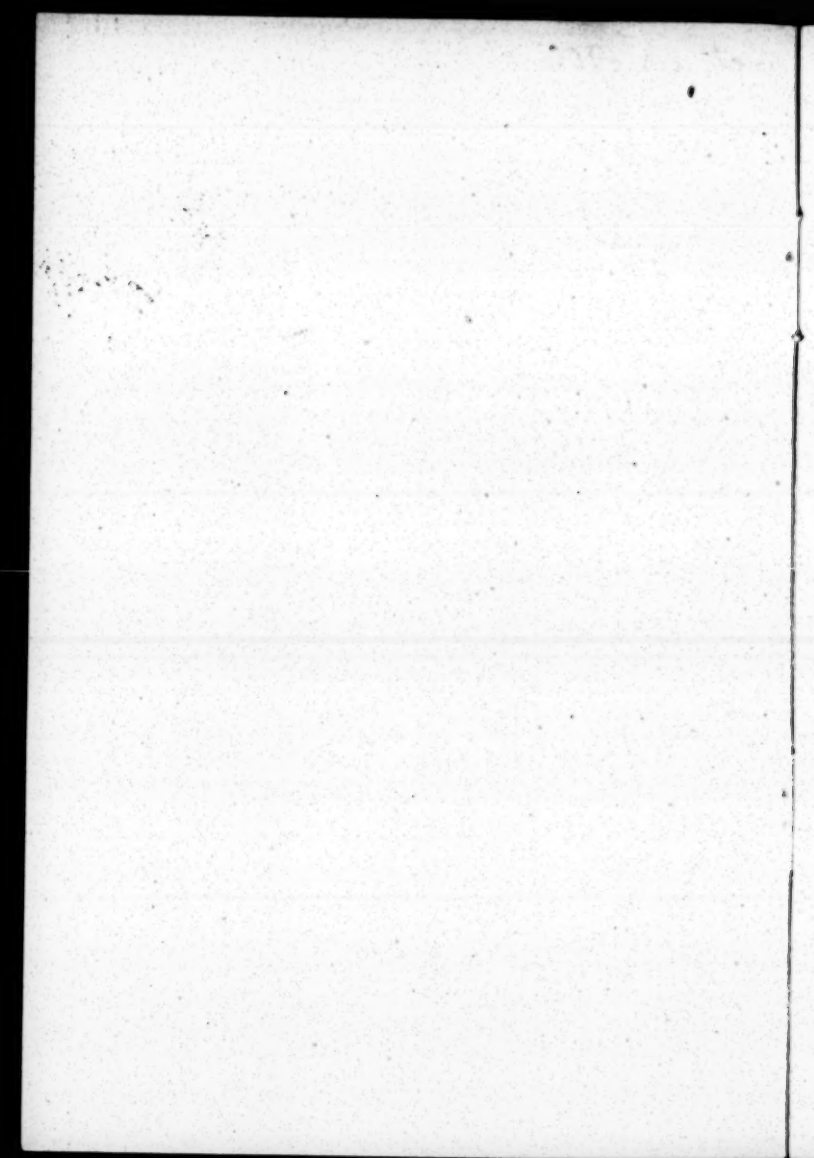
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A CHANGED PROGRAMME

BY
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**THE WOMAN'S BOARD OF HOME
MISSIONS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES
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Mrs. Ralph Moulton was disheartened. She had made a great effort to make the missionary meeting a success. Now the hour for it had arrived, and it promised to be anything but that. At the last minute, when there was not time to supply their places, two persons had dropped out of the programme. They sent good and sufficient excuses, but that didn't alter the fact.

To add to her discomfort, as she glanced over the women assembled, not more than twenty-five all told, she saw in the back seat Mrs. Van Verst. If there was any woman in the place whom she distinctly did not wish to be present at a dull missionary meeting, it was Mrs. Van Verst. Mrs. Moulton ignored her own fluttering heart as best she could, and opened the meeting with prayer. It helped and quieted her somewhat to speak to her heavenly Father. Then she read that strong first chapter of Joshua, so fitting for all missionary workers who go up to possess the land for Christ, and the courageous words helped, also.

After the hymn she said: "We are obliged to regret the necessary absence of two persons

who had important places on the programme, but doubtless you have heard the saying, 'Change the first letter of the word, and disappointment becomes His appointment.' Let us bow our heads once more in a moment of silent prayer that our present disappointment may be thus transformed, and then perhaps some one may give us an unexpected message."

Why she used the word "unexpected" she could never tell, but it was the right word. For at the close of that silent moment, without an instant's hesitation, Mrs. Van Verst rose and came forward.

She was a woman of commanding presence; she had been called proud, exclusive, unapproachable. Now there was a sweet, gentle dignity in her bearing, and her face looked as if some influence had not only chastened, but made it noble.

"Dear friends," she began, and every head bent forward, not to lose a word of this great surprise, "dear friends, this is the first time I have met with you, and I am ashamed of such a record. God willing, it shall not be the last. When your leader lamented the deficiency in the programme, and spoke of an unexpected message, it seemed like a mandate to me to tell you what has brought me here."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Van Verst to go straight to the point.

"Perhaps you know that I had one boy?"

Know it? Indeed they did. The gay escapades of Will Van Verst had been town talk a year or two before.

"Doubtless you have heard, too, that he died eight months ago." Her voice trembled, but she steadied it, and a light almost of gladness flashed over her face. "He was restless, and he drifted from home. It may be he had too much money to spend."

She said this in a humble manner, and not as if the possession of money was a matter for pride. Her audience listened in hushed wonder. Had they been mistaken in this woman? Had they given her hard judgment?

"Sometimes I heard from him, though often there were long intervals. He was going from place to place in the West, apparently enjoying a gay life. If I had my anxieties, I crushed them down. My Will could not go radically wrong. After a silence of some weeks a telegram came. My Will was dead."

She was weeping quietly, but the glad light did not go out of her face. There were sympathetic tears on other faces, but each one was amazed at this mother exultant in her grief.

"So he came back to me, dead—my boy who had gone out well and strong, and he lies by his father's side.

"A letter followed the telegram, reaching me the night after my child was buried. No one but my heavenly Father can ever know how the letter broke the gloom of that night. It was written by a woman—the woman who had nursed my Will, and in whose house he died. It told me many particulars, but what broke the gloom was the message that he died a Christian. Though I was no Christian

myself, I believed, and the words put to flight the terror which possessed me, but which I would not consciously admit. He had not gone unforgiven to a dread, dark future. What a relief it was!

"But no letter could satisfy me. I must see and talk with the one who sent it. The next week I was on the way to Utah. Oh! it was something—it was much, to be in the room where my child passed away. A humble home, it had no luxuries, to me it seemed that there were scarcely comforts, but everywhere there were the little touches which showed its occupants to be refined gentlewomen. They were, they are now, home missionary teachers among the Mormons."

When Mrs. Van Verst pronounced the names of the two missionaries, there were many nods and satisfied glances exchanged by the women present, as much as to say: "Oh, yes, we know about them."

She went on: "A small school building stands near, and there they teach the children, whether Mormon or Gentile, whose parents will allow them to come—teach them from books, and from the Book—teach them also by their own gentle lives. You know far better than I do the work such women do. I need not tell you just how or why my Will was in this town, nor how he fell ill. Enough that they heard of him about to be cast out from wretched quarters where he had no proper care when his money was gone, and they received him, as though he were an own child. I think it was because they loved the Master, and knew His work wherever they

saw it. So they nursed him back to life, as it seemed; and while they ministered, the two did what his own mother scarcely could have done—they prayed for his salvation.

"Thank God forever! their prayers were answered. It was not a deathbed conversion, upon which doubt might be cast; thank God for that also! Will was improving fast in the full tide of returning strength, and ready to consecrate his powers to this new service. They wished to write to me, but he said: 'No, I shall be able in a few days, and I want to tell mother myself—to tell her that I mean never to give her another sorrow.' He has not—oh, he has not. This is not sorrow, but joy!"

Again there was that light in her face. "Then came one of those sudden changes, and before they could send, he was gone. Dear friends, I stayed there a month; it seemed as if I could not leave the spot. In that little room where Will went home, kneeling beside his bed, I, too, asked forgiveness and found my Saviour. Having lived all my life in an Eastern town and gone to church on Sundays here, as the world counts it respectable to do, it seems strange, does it not, that I am a fruit of home missions?" She smiled through her tears. "Not that there was any lack here; the lack was in me, and my Father in His tenderness must use severe measures. I thank Him that He has left no bitterness in my sorrow."

Mrs. Moulton could maintain her presidential dignity no longer, or rather she forgot all about it. She stepped down from the plat-

form to offer a welcoming hand and to say, "My sister." Many others came forward, also, and the meeting threatened to break bounds. Mrs. Van Verst's quiet voice claimed their attention once more.

"Thank you all," she said. "Life can never be very lonely since you give me these new ties. My story is not quite finished.

"I wanted to look into the work of these two women who had done so much for me. Day after day I visited the schoolroom. It was a pleasure to watch the children's faces, as intelligence, honor, and truthfulness grew daily more apparent. So far as possible I noted the influence of school and teachers upon the community, only to be convinced that the little leaven was working. These two dear friends—none dearer now—were surprised at my ignorance of woman's work in missions. Was there not a society in the church I attended? Were there not notices of meetings? To my shame, I could not say—I was obliged to confess that I had paid no heed to notices. Now it is different—I heard the notice last Sunday, you may be sure of that. They unfolded the plan of the great work of the Board under which they held commission; they told me of Alaska, of the vast West and South, dotted as yet too sparsely with schools. It is not news to you, but it was to me. Without meaning to hurt me, they made me see that I had been not only unchristian, but unpatriotic. They spoke of the thousands of children who but for such agencies would grow up in vice and degradation, a future peril to our country, and who

would live and die unsaved. How ashamed I was that I, a mother, had never thought of them; that I, who had prided myself on my culture, was such an ignoramus.

"One day the question came to me, Why not see for myself? Why not, indeed? My son would not miss me. Now before the throne of God, if he knows (I like to think he does), does he not rejoice that his mother has been on such a quest? I have been in Alaska, in the Dakotas, in New Mexico, in North Carolina. I need not name the States or Territories or places, you have the list of schools, but everywhere I looked up the links of this wondrous chain. I learned much about home missions in other departments. I have stayed in home-mission families, and have seen the brave suffering of delicate women and children, because the salary was reduced or delayed. I cannot tell the half, but to me the work is a miracle, slowly wrought it may be, but still a miracle."

She said the words solemnly, and sat down, while the thought went through more than one mind, "You are a part of the miracle."

A moment's hush followed. Then she added, "If you would like to know particulars of the schools, please ask me."

Once started by a courageous voice, how they stormed her with questions about Chilcat, Juneau, Salt Lake, Albuquerque, Asheville, about the Indians, the Mexicans, the Mountain Whites, the Mormons. It was a revelation to this woman to see how much these other women knew, these women who had been educated in home mission affairs,

what intelligent questions they asked. The minutes flew. They forgot all about the programme, and prudent Mrs. Moulton reflected that it would keep till another time.

Before they separated Mrs. Van Verst paid a gracious, humble tribute to the others. "If I have taken too much time and have talked much about myself, it was necessary in order to tell my story. I feel keenly that I have not reached the high motive which actuates you—to work simply for Christ's sake, because it is His work. But I believe that He will lead me up through the lower motive of personal gratitude, just as we lure a child to higher attainments. I am but a child yet, while you are well grown. 'We love Him because He first loved us.' That is my comfort. He does use the lower motive to lift us higher. It is only God who gives before receiving. I humbly thank Him that He has given me life for my boy, life for myself. I want to be counted one with you in this work, for all I am and have are His."

Mrs. Moulton rose. "Let us have a word of prayer before we go."

It was unprecedented for the president to pray twice in one meeting, but now no one thought of that, and her heart was too full to speak through another's lips. It was a wonderfully simple, childlike prayer, and her faith brought every one present to the altar of consecration.

When at the close bowed heads were lifted the impress of a solemn promise was set on many a face.

FORWARD.

